

Breaking Through Overwhelm

By Ali Mattu, Ph.D.

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How to Stop Hating Being Stressed

Feeling stressed doesn't mean you're failing. It means you still care.



When I was 25, I was deep in grad school, and starting to doubt everything.

I was living in Washington, D.C. working toward my Ph.D. in clinical psychology. I was wondering if I was only there to make my parents proud. Maybe I should've been a photojournalist? A filmmaker? Someone doing something that felt more *alive*.

Meanwhile, friends who skipped grad school were already making real money while I was sinking deeper into student debt. I was struggling with the research side of my

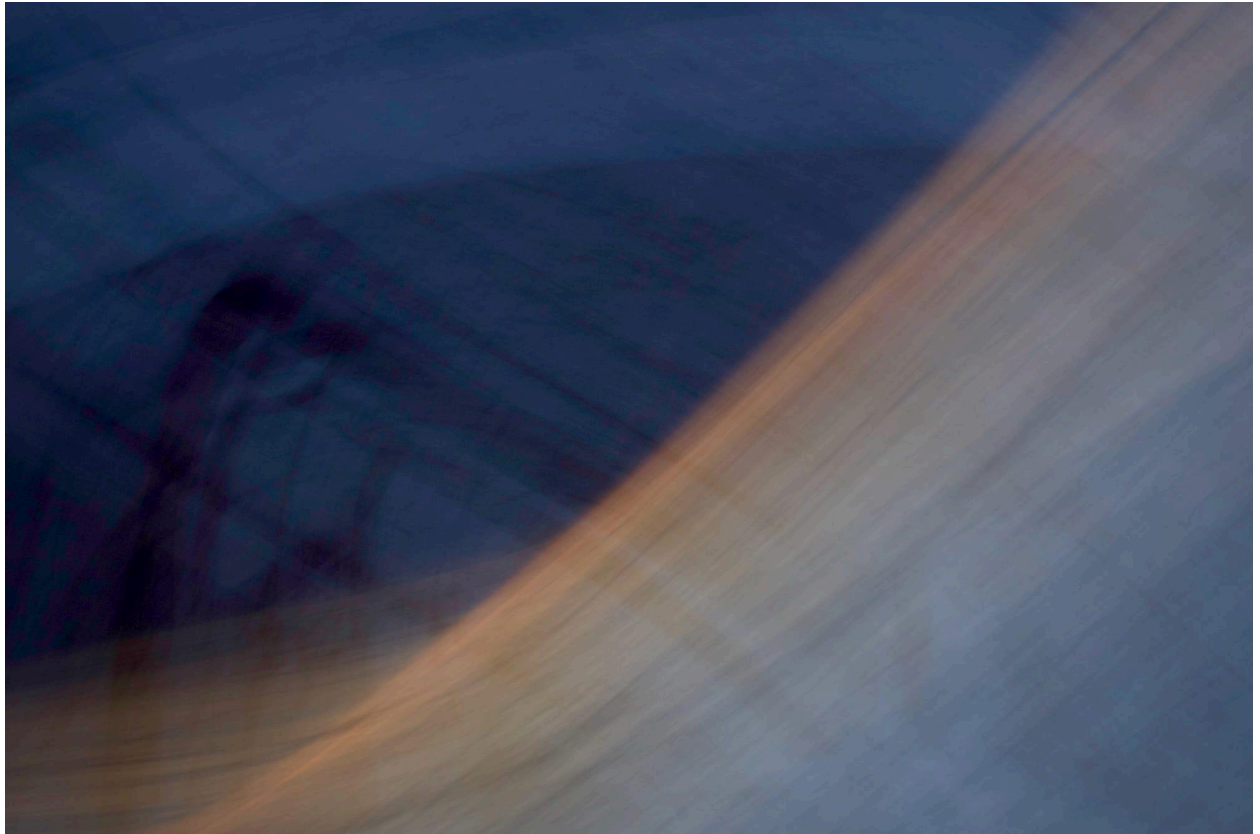
Ph.D. I was making big mistakes in stats, feeling like every failure was a reflection of why I didn't belong here.

It didn't feel like I was steering my life. It felt like life was steering me.

For a long time, I carried that feeling everywhere. It showed up in how I studied, how I doubted myself around friends, how I questioned every big decision. Stress felt like a heavy pressure that pulled me further and further into isolation. I kept imagining that doors were closing behind me, one by one, and I just stood there, too scared to move forward.

I didn't have any big breakthroughs. It was smaller than that.

I heard about a local photography festival. A chance to submit a few photos and get feedback on how to improve. I hadn't touched my camera in months. I signed up and submitted three photos: a long exposure, a portrait, and a landscape.







It felt good. Fun, just to be around people who weren't doing psychology.

Then I found out about something called Project 365. One photo a day, every day, for a year. It sounded impossible. I did it anyway.

Every day, no matter how stressed I was, I found something to capture and shared it on Facebook, back when it was only four years old and still felt exciting and supportive.

It didn't remove my stress or solve my problems. But it gave me something that was mine. Something I felt good about.

Taking those daily photos made me feel like I existed again and that I was in control.

That small act, choosing one thing for myself, every day, changed me.

It reminded me that stress wasn't proof that I was broken or failing. Stress meant I cared. It meant I wanted a future. And when I stopped fighting that feeling, when I let myself feel it and do something about it, the heaviness lifted, just a little.

It's like what psychologist Dr. Kelly McGonigal says in *The Upside of Stress*:

“Stress happens when something you care about is at stake. It's not a sign to run away. It's a sign to step forward.”

When you realize that, you stop seeing stress as the enemy. You start seeing it as part of the process.

I'm sharing this because *many* of you are feeling overwhelmed right now. You feel trapped under constant pressure. You're constantly losing motivation. Can't figure out a way to move forward. And everything happening in the world is making you feel even more powerless.

Stress isn't proof you're a screw up. It's proof you care. And caring gives you direction.

You can still create something meaningful inside this terrible, overwhelming feeling.

Over the next 5 days, I'm going to show you:

- How to understand your stress
- How to work with it, instead of against it
- How to use it as a signal for what matters most

What is one thing your stress is trying to tell you?

In the next lesson, I break down how stress traps you and [the one key that can get you moving again](#).

Talk soon,

Dr. Ali

P.S. If you'd like to learn about approaching stress this way, Dr. McGonigal has an excellent TED talk about [how to make stress your friend](#).

P.P.S. I never became a full-time creative. But sticking with photography gave me the skills to launch a YouTube channel and eventually, it led me here, connecting with you.

All Stress Experts Know This ONE Thing

If you've been feeling overwhelmed, stuck, or anxious, this might explain why nothing's helped yet.



[In the first lesson of this mini-course](#), I shared a simple truth:

Stress isn't proof you're a screw-up. It's proof you care.

Today, we're going one level deeper into what stress actually *is* and why it can feel so impossible to manage.

Stress vs. Anxiety

People use these words interchangeably. But they aren't the same.

- **Stress** is a response to something external: a deadline, a sick loved one, a breaking news alert.
- **Anxiety** is what happens when you imagine threats before they happen: failing the deadline, losing the loved one, the news getting worse.

They feel similar:

- Tension
- Racing thoughts
- Feeling moody
- Stomach issues

Stress usually fades when the pressure is gone. Anxiety can linger, loop, and spiral even when nothing's happening right now.

But some stressors don't really end...

When Stress Doesn't Fade

As neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky explains in *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, our stress response evolved to deal with physical danger, like a zebra being chased by lion:

“...if you are that zebra running for your life, or that lion sprinting for your meal, your [stress is] superbly adapted for dealing with such short-term physical emergencies...When we sit around and worry about stressful things, we turn on the same physiological responses—but they are potentially a disaster when provoked chronically.”

More simply, our stress is built for short bursts of survival, not for endless activation.

But today's stressors — finances, deadlines, loneliness, existential dread — are long and unsolvable in the short term. Instead of completing the stress cycle, we get trapped inside it.

It's like fueling a Formula 1 car to race...but never letting it drive, just leaving the engine revving endlessly. The system was built for movement. Not idling.



My Endless Stress

During the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, I lived this first-hand.

My wife and I were trading off Zoom meetings. Our toddler was home with no childcare. There were no breaks. No certainty. And for a long time, no hope.

At night, when the house finally went quiet, my mind would turn on, running through fears and worst-case scenarios. I couldn't sleep. I was exhausted *and* wired.



I hated being this psychologist who had spent years helping people manage their stress and sleep...and none of my usual tools were working on me.

So I reached out for help.

I contacted Dr. Helen Hsu, a psychologist I admire deeply. She helped me try new skills I had taught others but never used on myself (because psychologists can be annoying like that):

- Body scan meditations
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Visualization exercises



My meeting with Dr. Hsu

The breakthrough came when I stopped trying to “think my way out” of stress and instead did something physical before sleeping.

Stretching my body. Relaxing my muscles. Visualizing a happy memory (my wedding day). These small acts gave my nervous system something to finish. A way to complete the stress cycle.

I wasn't fixing the world. But I was giving my body a way to finish what stress had started.

Where I Am Now

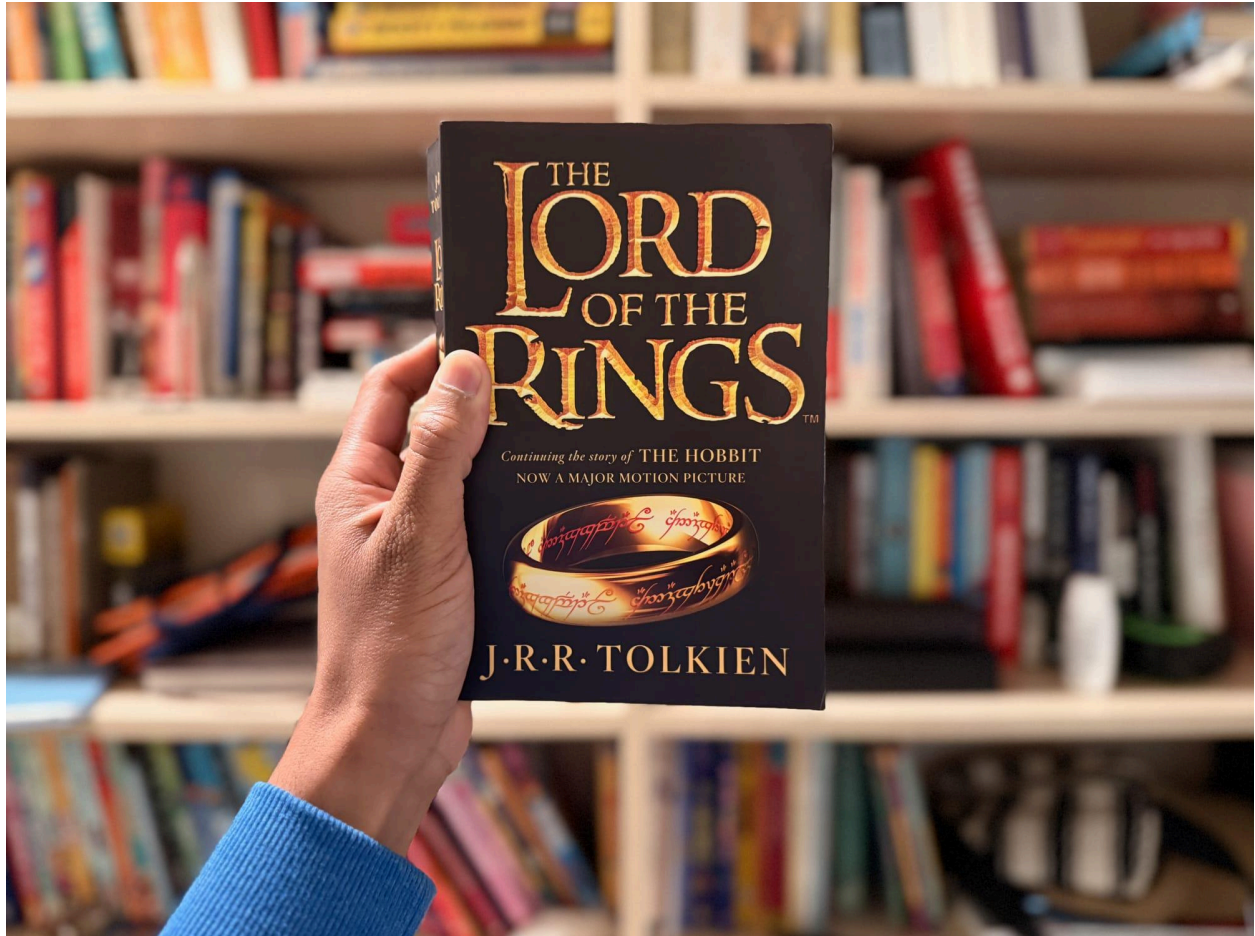
It's been almost five years since then. Those mind-body skills are part of my daily life now, even during good times.

But lately, some insomnia has crept back. You might be feeling it too. The world's unrest can feel heavy.

This time, I've found something new that's helping: reading a really good story before bedtime.

Specifically, *The Lord of the Rings*. I've seen the movies a ton of times but never read the books.

Last night, Frodo and the fellowship were stuck in a blizzard. Exhausted, uncertain, still marching on. And I realized that's what I'm trying to do too.



Why This Matters

Whether it's photography, stretching, or Tolkien, what helped me wasn't escaping stress. It was choosing one small act that gave me *some* control.

That's the heart of all effective stress coping:

- Not numbing.
- Not powering through.
- Not pretending the stress isn't real.

But moving with it and reclaiming even a tiny sense of direction.

How to Start Closing the Stress Loop

Small actions help your brain complete the stress cycle and turn on your body's relaxation response. They help shift you from sympathetic nervous system activation (stress) to parasympathetic activation (relaxation).

That could mean:

- **Giving your muscles something to do:** walk, stretch, dance.
- **Slowing your breath:** longer exhales naturally trigger calm.
- **Connecting with green spaces:** hikes, parks, or even nature videos.
- **Doing something joyful:** hobbies, comedy, gaming.

You're not "defeating" stress. You're letting your nervous system finish the race it started and finally rest.

Next lesson, [I show you how to work the problem.](#)

Your turn! How can you be more like a zebra? What's one small action you could take today to feel a little more in control?

Talk soon,

Dr. Ali

P.S. Want to see the full story of how I rebuilt my sleep during the pandemic, including my meeting with Dr. Hsu? [Watch the video here](#). Also check out Dr. Hsu's [*The Healing Trauma Workbook for Asian Americans*](#) which is full of skills for dealing with the stress of trauma (affiliate link supports this website).

P.P.S. For more actions you can take when stressed, check out my Braver with Anxiety course ([lesson 5](#) and [lesson 6](#)).

What Makes Someone Unstuck?

Stuck doesn't mean hopeless. Try this 3-step reset.



In my last lesson, we talked about how [small actions help your body complete the stress cycle](#).

But stress doesn't just live in your body. It exists because something real is happening in your life. And when that real problem feels unsolvable, stress spirals.

You know the feeling:

- Overwhelmed
- Stuck
- Waiting for clarity
- No motivation

I was just there not too long ago.

“You’ve got six months to fix this.”



In January 2024, I went in for a routine physical and was stunned by what my doctor told me.

My cholesterol had spiked into dangerous territory.

My A1C (a marker for diabetes risk) was up.

My weight hit an all-time high.

I'd been stressed about my health since 2019. Which probably helped throw it even more out of whack. But something recently made things *a lot* worse. The numbers were undeniable. My doctor didn't sugarcoat it:

"You've got six months to change what you can. If things don't improve, we'll start medications, and once we start, we may not be able to stop."

It hit hard. My mom had just had a stroke. I've got two young kids. I want to be healthy enough to chase them for years.

But leaving that appointment, I was overwhelmed.

It was too much to change.

Where do I even start?

The Miracle Question

That same week, I was reading *Little Treatments, Big Effects* by psychologist Dr. Jessica Schleider. Her work centers on single-session interventions, mental health strategies that create meaningful change in just one meeting.

At the heart of her approach is something called the miracle question:

“Suppose that while you are sleeping, a miracle occurs. The top struggle you’re facing disappears. When you wake up, how will you know a miracle has occurred? What will be different?”

I scribbled out my answers:

1. My doctor would send me great lab results.
2. I’d know how to maintain a healthy lifestyle.
3. Energy and focus would improve.

At first, this didn’t help much. I still didn’t know how to get there.

But one phrase kept standing out:

“I’d know how to maintain a healthy lifestyle.”

That felt like a solvable piece of the puzzle.

So I messaged my doctor:

“What’s the healthiest thing I can do every day to reduce my cholesterol and A1C?”

She said: *“Eat a lot more vegetables.”* Then referred me to a dietitian.

That seemed manageable. I tossed out my chips and dip and picked up veggies and hummus (which I always loved).



When I met with the dietitian, I asked her the same question. She had me track everything I ate (which I hated). But a week of embarrassing food photos later, she gave me a clear answer:

“Stop eating after 8pm. Most of your random snacking happens late. Let your body rest.”

That felt doable. I swapped nighttime snacks for peppermint tea.

And within a few days, something shifted. I slept better! My watch even told me my overnight heartrate had improved.

A few weeks later, my pants fit better.

I also wasn't hungry in the morning anymore.

This was what Dr. Schleider calls an upward spiral of change, a micro-moment of success that builds momentum.

Now, more than a year later, I've lost the weight I gained during the pandemic. My A1C is back to normal. My cholesterol is still tricky. Turns out I have a genetic tendency to hoard it (which is probably why my mom had a stroke). So now I take medication for cholesterol, and I'm totally okay with that.

What changed everything wasn't a huge lifestyle overhaul. It was one tiny, brave moment that got me moving again.

Work the Problem

Here's how you can use the same method in your own life:

Step 1: Ask the Miracle Question

If your biggest struggle disappeared overnight, what would be different?

What would you feel, do, say, or believe?

Write it down. Make it concrete.

Step 2: Choose One Thing from Your List

Look over what you wrote.

Circle one small change that feels doable.

Not the whole miracle, just one thread you can pull.

Step 3: Try the Simplest Possible Version

Shrink it down.

What's the *easiest* way to try that step today?

Ask yourself:

- What might get in my way, inside me and outside me?
- What could make this easier?
- Who could help me take one small step?

Why This Works



Dr. Schleider's research shows that a single moment of agency, one spark of "*I can do something*", can lead to real, lasting change.

You don't need a six-month plan.

You don't need to overhaul your life.

You just need to prove to yourself that forward motion is possible.

Your Turn

- ✓ Ask the miracle question
- ✓ Choose one part of your answer
- ✓ Try the smallest version of it today

That's it.

Five brave minutes. One micro-moment of change.


That's how you get unstuck.

What's one small thing you could try today to move toward your miracle?

Next lesson, [I share simple scripts for asking for help](#), even when it feels awkward or hard.

Talk soon,

Dr. Ali

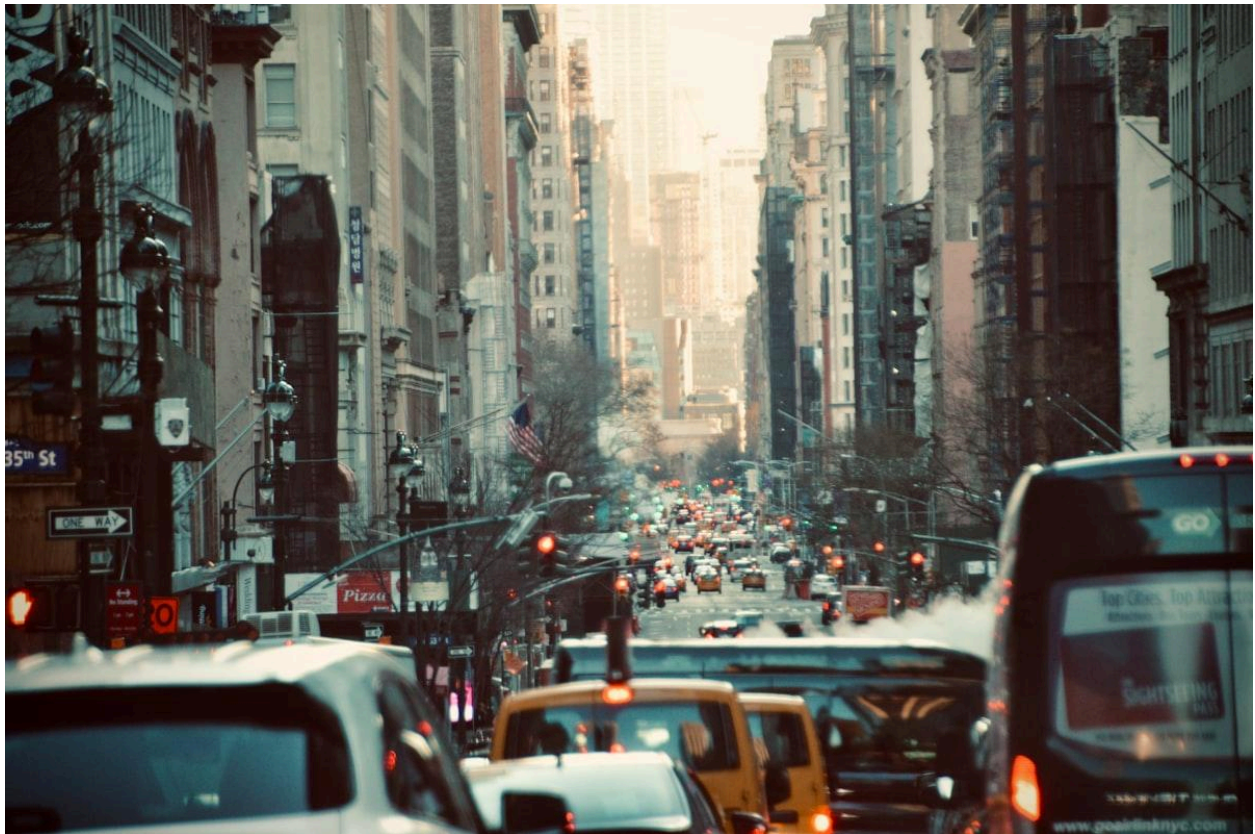
P.S. Want help with the miracle question? Download Dr. Schleider's Miracle Worksheet
here 

Single-Session Action Plan.pdf 113 KB

P.P.S. If your first attempt doesn't create change, that's okay. It doesn't mean you failed.
You might just need to try something smaller, experiment with a different version of the
goal, or bring someone else into the process.

7 Ways to Ask for Help (Without Sounding Weak)

Unsure how to ask for help? You're not alone. These scripts make it as easy as copy and paste.



In the last lesson of this mini-course, [we talked about getting unstuck](#), how to take one small step forward when stress makes everything feel immovable.

You might have noticed at the core of that story was me getting advice from other people on the smallest type of change I can make that would lead to the best results.

Today, let's talk about how you too can get help moving forward.

The Help I Didn't Ask For



Back in 2011, I was finishing my Ph.D. training at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. I was running late one morning, sprinting to catch the downtown 2nd Ave express bus. I *just* missed it. And as it drove off, it hit a puddle, spraying me head to toe with that special kind of filthy New York street water that had been sitting there for weeks. I was soaked, humiliated, and smelled like mold.

When I finally snuck into the hospital, trying to avoid my supervisors from realizing how late I was, my friend Courtney noticed something was off. She looked at me and asked, “You okay? You seem a bit preoccupied.”

I told her what happened. The missed bus, the splash, the paranoia about how I smelled, and the dread of the 12-hour workday ahead. She didn’t try to fix it or minimize it. She just said, “Ugh, that sucks. I’d be so pissed if that happened to me.”

I immediately felt less unhinged. Less alone. Like I could put my guard down just a bit.

That’s social support.

Psychologist Shelly Taylor puts it like this:

“Whereas other animals are armed with weapons, such as sharp teeth or claws, and defensive resources such as thick skin and speed, primate species depend critically on group living for survival.”

We evolved to deal with stress through others.

My working definition: Social support is getting help in the way you want to be helped and giving help in the way the other person wants to be helped.

Sometimes that means talking about what's on your mind. Sometimes it means just being together and not talking about what's on your mind.

With the right kind of support, you can:

- Get a break from your stress
- Receive tangible help
- Learn from people who've lived it

But the kind of social support I got that day in NYC, well it doesn't happen as much anymore. That was before smartphones were everywhere. Before remote work made daily connection optional. Before I had kids, responsibilities, and a schedule so full I barely see my own friends.

Support used to happen more automatically. Now we have to engineer it.

So that's what I've done.

Below are real messages I've sent or coached others to use. They're all framed as texts but you could easily turn these into emails or IRL talk.



1. When You Want to Talk

- “Can I get your take on this? I need a second opinion...”
- “It’s been a loooong week. You want to hangout sometime soon? Maybe we can get something to eat.”
- “I’m really, really overwhelmed about something. Can I share a little about what’s going on? I think it might help just to talk it out with you.”

2. Practical Help

- “Do you have any free time in the next few weeks? I really could really use your help with something. Should only take about an hour.”
- “I’m a bit behind on my assignments and could really use your advice on how to catch up. Is there a good time I could come in to talk about this with you?”
- “Question for you...how does one even do laundry and dishes? Cause I feel like giving up over here.”

3. Information and Advice

- “I’m trying to make a big decision, but I keep going in circles. Can I talk it through with you?”
- “Something feels off with [situation]. I’d love your honest opinion on it.”
- “Can I run something by you? There’s this situation that just doesn’t feel right to me.”

4. Easy Conversations

- “It’s been awhile. How are things going?”
- “I’m sitting here with nothing to watch. Got any recs?”
- “I was just thinking about you! Remember that time when we...?”
- “This is totally you [insert social media link]”

5. Online Communities

If talking to someone you know isn't an option, try posting on a Reddit community like:

- [r/Advice](#)
- [r/HelpMe](#)
- [r/vent](#)
- [r/NoStupidQuestions](#)

Just remember that Reddit might not be reflective of the same people you'd interact with around your home (i.e. they're often younger and snarkier).

6. Generative AI

You can also try chatting with AI (chatGPT, Claude, Gemini, etc). A lot of people feel less judged with AI and more comfortable talking about personal topics.

AI won't replace real relationships, and it is just guessing at what's the best thing to say (which can lead to mistakes), but it can help you warm up to conversations or get unstuck when reaching out feels too hard.

Here are some prompts you can use:

- "Can you help me sort out what I'm feeling?"

- “Can you help me feel less alone right now?”
- “Can you give me a little pep talk for getting through today?”
- “I’m feeling stuck. Can you help me figure out what to say or do next?”
- “Can you help me write a message to someone I want to reconnect with?”
- “Let’s do a little journaling together. Can you ask me a reflective question to start?”
- “Can we have a casual chat? I just want a bit of company right now.”

You might like using voice mode for this instead of text, though that's usually a paid feature.

7. Crisis Support

[I have a lot of linked resources](#) that can help you connect with crisis support if you immediately want someone to talk to.

It's Not About Being Social All the Time



You don't need dozens of friends or a group chat full of hot takes. You just need the right support from one person.

It's going to take some experimenting to figure out who is the right type of person for the right type of support. When you get unsolicited advice or over-helping...that can make

you feel worse. The more you try the better you'll figure out how to do this in a way that works for you.

And if you feel guilty about asking for help, remember this: Studies show people who give support often benefit as much if not more than those who receive it. Social support is mutual medicine.

Your Turn

Take one of these templates and make it your own. Even if you don't send it yet, just knowing you have it ready can help.

In the next lesson I show you how to [stop the flow of unnecessary stressors](#).

Talk soon,

Dr. Ali

What I Learned Doomscrolling on the Toilet

Yes, we should all stop reading the news (like this).



In the last lesson you learned [how to connect with other people](#).

Here, we're diving into the time of day I feel most disconnected from the people I love.

When I go to the toilet, I instinctively reach for my phone.

Bad habit I picked up...15 years ago?

Oh my gosh...has it really been that long?

It starts with one headline:

- A war
- An injustice
- A crisis

I click. I scroll. I get stressed.

I try to break free.

Switch to Instagram

- Cute baby
- Climate disaster
- A friend's perfect vacation
- The AI apocalypse.
- Weird political disinformation.

Seventeen minutes later, I'm still on the toilet.

My left leg is numb. My brain's on fire.

I hear my wife yelling, "Ali, where *are* you?"

My daughter responds, "He's probably on the toilet."

Eventually I limp out:

1. Guilty that I'm not doing enough to fix the world.
2. Ashamed I just wasted 17 minutes doing absolutely nothing of substance.
3. Totally stressed about what comes next.

The Overwhelm That Won't Stop



We live in a time where information isn't just constant, it's weaponized to harvest your attention.

The "information superhighway" was supposed to free us. But it feels like a prison.

Everything on your phone is designed to make you click, feel, stay, and scroll. Not because it's good for you. Because the longer you stay, the more money *they* make from your eyeballs.

And it works.

I know it works because I use the same tools to make my videos:

- An emotional thumbnail and curiosity-driven title
- A strong hook in the first 5 seconds
- A clear promise to keep you watching
- And a cliffhanger at the end to launch the next video

This is literally the playbook YouTubers share with each other and what the platform rewards.

The entire philosophy behind Silicon Valley is this:

Make it super easy to stay. Make it really hard to leave.

I completely recognize this is an uphill battle. But here's the truth:

No one will protect your attention for you. You have to protect it.

Because if you let the algorithms decide what fills your mental backpack, they'll stuff it with everything. And you'll be carrying it all day. Stressed, scattered, and unable to deal with your own life.

Remember how I talked about [stress being a loop, like a zebra running to escape a lion](#)? Well, every time you read a terrifying headline, you're opening a new stress loop. But unlike the zebra, you don't get to outrun the lion. The threat just lingers, watching you from the brush. No resolution. No closure. Just loop after loop left open, until your brain is running in circles and your body never gets to stand down.

You can't care about everything. You're not supposed to.

So what do you do instead?

Here's the system I've developed to help me with my information overload.

Step 1: Choose Information That Works for Your Brain



I now consume most of my news through audio. Podcasts, hourly briefings, daily summaries. I listen once to the headlines in the morning after dropping my kids off at school and once on the way to pick them up in the afternoon. No visuals. No autoplay. No algorithmic recommendations.

I've learned emotional images and clickbait headlines hijack my brain for the rest of the day. They drain my empathy and I have a hard time getting those horrific images out of my head.

I stay away from social platforms for news. I subscribe to a couple newsletters and podcasts that give me curated, contextual, big-picture updates, not every single breaking news story because honestly, there are too many.

And no notifications! If it's not a text, a call from a school, or something urgent about work I don't want to hear about it.

Step 2: Stay Connected to the Causes That Matter



This part's important:

I haven't unplugged from the world. I still care deeply.

But I stay updated on specific causes I care about by subscribing to a few newsletters. That keeps me informed without drowning in it. And I pick the causes based on what most impacts me, my family, the communities I belong to, and the issues I have the power, agency, and obligation to speak to.

It's the difference between 150 open tabs and 5.

Open-tab people, I respect you, but I'll never understand you.

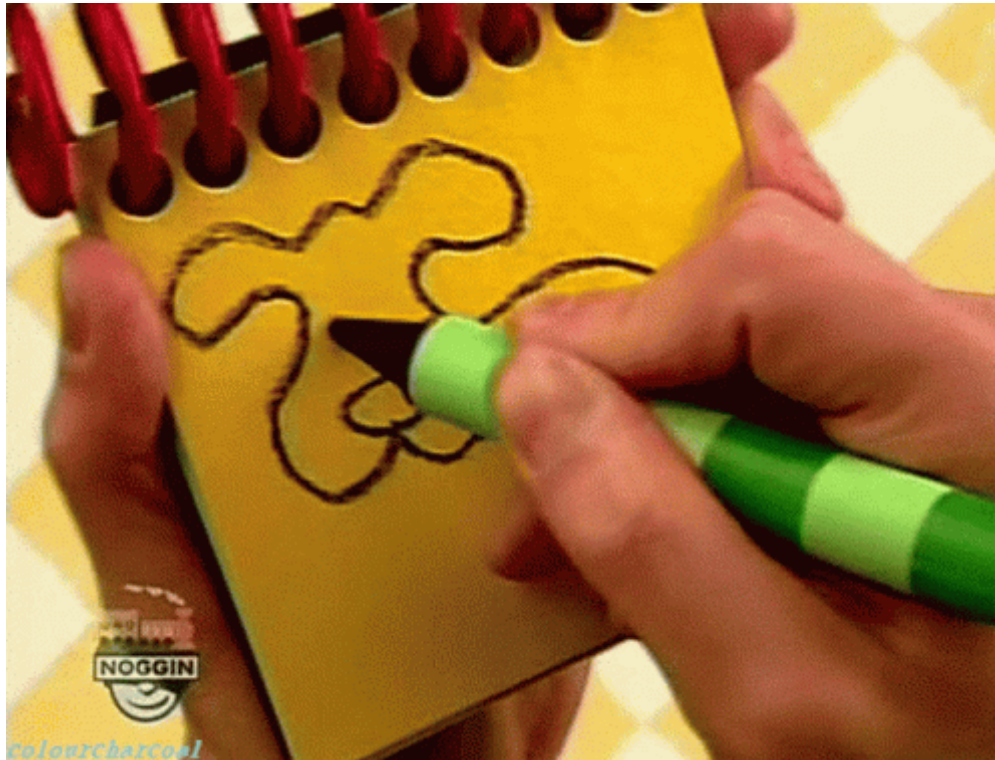
PROTIP: It's always better to stay connected with a cause through real people and real community IRL. That might mean showing up in person, volunteering, or joining a group. But I know that's not always possible (or safe) for everyone. So do what you can, in the ways that work for your life.

I also set boundaries with people who keep sending me traumatic headlines. I've told friends and family, "Hey, I deal with a lot of stress in my work and life and these articles are really bad for my brain. Would you mind not sending them to me?"

It makes for an awkward conversation sometimes but I haven't lost any friends as a result of it.

...or you can just mute them and skip the awkwardness.

Step 3: Rebuild Joyful Spaces



Social platforms aren't social anymore. They've become entertainment-news hybrids, run by algorithms designed to keep you in a cycle of intense emotion.

Even Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg admitted this during last week's Federal Trade Commission antitrust trial. He said Facebook and Instagram are now focused on "the general idea of entertainment and learning about the world and discovering what's going on." He shared internal data showing that time spent viewing friends' content is down to just 17% on Facebook and 7% on Instagram.

In other words, social media is serving me a carefully engineered cocktail of garbage:

- Ads I'll never click
- Opinions I didn't ask for
- Doom disguised as "what's happening"

It's not about connecting me with friends. It's about keeping me emotionally hooked, mentally exhausted, and easier to manipulate.

So I'm trying really hard to use the internet on my terms.

I trimmed who I follow. I *heavily* mute accounts on my feeds. I try to keep my apps and followers to the ones that feel like "power-ups": YouTube channels that teach me storytelling, Reddit threads about cool scifi spaceships, cute dogs.

And I fill my real world space (okay, mostly my bathroom) with stuff I'd much rather get lost in:

- Reading a few pages of a book
- Doodling
- Jotting story ideas

I don't always do these instead of scrolling. But they're easier to reach for when I've made them visible.

Step 4: Zoom In, Get Local



One last shift that really helped?

Looking closer to home.

National news is overwhelming. It's all massive problems and heavy lifts. But local change? That's actually within my reach.

I started following local government pages. Subscribed to a neighborhood newsletter. Learned which city reps I can email when something isn't working.

My daughter's school needed help getting a crosswalk sign added. I sent a few emails. A few other parents got involved. Now we have a crosswalk.

Small action. Real impact.

Zooming in doesn't make the big problems disappear. But it reminds you that *you're not powerless*. [And like we discussed in previous lessons, that matters.](#)

Your Turn



Let's lighten your mental backpack.

Pick one action to try today:

- Turn off notifications that hijack your focus
- Delete one app that drains your energy
- Subscribe to a cause that genuinely matters to you
- Put a book, a magazine (remember those?), or a doodle pad in your scroll zone

Then email me. I'd love to know what you're going to try.

Hopefully, I won't be replying from the toilet.

Though let's be real, I probably will be.

Maybe it's time I just leave my phone in another room when I pee.

Next up is the final lesson: [how to find meaning when nothing seems to matter](#).

Talk soon,

Dr. Ali

Numb ≠ Broken

This is a normal response to an abnormal world



In the last lesson you learned how to [take back control of your attention](#) from the algorithms.

Now, let's talk about where your mind might go when the noise fades.

A few weeks ago, I got a message from someone named Yuki.

It became the reason I made this course.

Here's what he said:

I've been feeling numb. The world's unraveling, and I'm stuck on autopilot: wake up, eat, work out, scroll, sleep, repeat. There's so much suffering, and I feel disconnected. I keep wondering if I'm broken.

Yuki's message hit me hard because I've been feeling some of the same.

As a '90s kid, I grew up believing things were getting better. That humanity could solve big problems.

- We fixed the ozone layer.
- America and Russia made peace.
- We connected the world through the internet.

But the last few years have shattered that optimism.

- The world keeps getting warmer.
- Nationalism is rising, everywhere.
- Technology is driving disconnection.

We live in a time of extraordinary uncertainty. And for many of us, that triggers fear, grief, and numbness.

But feeling numb right now doesn't mean you're broken. It's a normal response to an abnormal world.

This isn't just in your head. According to the American Psychological Association, 77% of U.S. adults say the future of America is a significant source of stress, and more than half fear that democracy might be coming to an end.

And that data's from last year. I can only imagine what those numbers look like now.

So many forces brought us to this place. But COVID cracked something wide open. It reminded us how interconnected we are and how helpless we can be.

That scared us.

Now countries are pulling back. Turning inward. But we can't solve problems this big in isolation.

And so we're left with the question a lot of us are quietly asking:

"What's the point anymore?"

We Are Questioned by Life



This brings me to psychologist Dr. Viktor Frankl.

Frankl survived the Holocaust. He lost his wife, parents, and brother in Nazi concentration camps. He endured unspeakable suffering. And what he wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning* has helped millions:

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

He reframed the question of suffering from:

Why is this happening to me?

to

What is life asking of me right now?

Frankl believed meaning must be discovered:

- We must find ways to do purposeful work.
- To care for others.
- To bring courage to difficult times.

What I've taken from Frankl's work is this:

Meaning isn't something you find once. It's something you continuously create, day by day, through how you respond to what life throws at you.

How I Found Meaning Again



Lately, I haven't focused on some grand career milestone. I don't believe in those anymore.

1. I became a psychologist only to discover the mental healthcare system is a total disaster.
2. I got my dream job then left because the university drove me to burnout.
3. I crossed 100,000 subscribers on YouTube...and nothing changed in my life at all.

Coming out of the pandemic, with wildfires and floods hitting my community, I felt lost.

Until I turned local. Like...very local.

Now I get meaning by being of service to my neighbors. My children's schools. My friends. My family.

I know from my work how many people are suffering right now. How many are stretched thin. How bleak the world looks.

I also know I like being with people. I can be funny (sometimes). I'm able-bodied and in good health.

So I try, as best as I can, to be the best part of someone's day.

That might mean sweeping leaves off my neighbor's sidewalk. Helping an older couple with their phone. Checking in on friends. Creating opportunities for people to be together.

It might sound insignificant. But every time I have these moments, I walk away feeling like I made a tangible, positive difference in someone's life.

And that's everything.

You might not be like me.

In fact, many of you have told me that one of your biggest struggles is finding the confidence to connect with other people.

But I *know* you have some strengths. Some gift. Something you can do that will help someone else. Something you can create that will put good into the world.

It might be as simple as noticing one person you see every day and helping them with something they struggle with every day.

Find that thing.

Make it your thing.

That's more than enough.

It's how we build the strength to keep moving forward.

Small steps. Real progress.



I hope this course has shown you that stress isn't just something to fix. It's a message. It's asking you to show up. To take action.

And what we need now, more than ever, is for you to show up.

That's what I've tried to do here. To show up for you in this unprecedented...*yuck* we're in.

So let me ask you:

What is life asking of you right now?

- A)** Doing work that matters
- B)** Caring for others
- C)** Enduring something with strength
- D)** I'm still figuring it out

Don't let the noise of the world sabotage you.

You don't need to have it all figured out.

You just need one step.

One small spark.

Start there.

Start somewhere.

Start now.

Dr. Ali